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Barbara Hamby

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JAMES ATKINS, IRLANDESE

Our apartment in Florence is like the set of a play by Molière.
Across the courtyard live the octogenarian Count and

Countess degli Alessandri,
downstairs the sinister portiere and his beleaguered wife.
Is the count's brother plotting to kill him? It seems entirely
plausible, given the archways and thick walls of our present
hacienda.

"Somehow I doubt it," says my husband from behind
La Repubblica, "seeing that they're both in their eighties."
I'm so mixed up. We're in Italy. We have a courtyard with a
fountain and lemon trees in pots, and a bedroom the size of
Versailles with paintings in gold frames.

I lie in bed and gaze across the room at the portrait of a
delicate young man or robust woman, the chiaroscuro
being more scuro than chiaro,

And this cavalier (a he, I believe, rosy lips and languid eyes
notwithstanding) wears a wide-brimmed hat with feathers
and a lace jabot, glances seductively over his shoulder.

Attached to the gilt upper edge is a plaque, inscribed in
rococo script: James Atkins, Irlandese.

Delirious, I say it over and over, "James Atkins, Irlandese.
James Atkins. Irlandese."

Have I, like Stendhal, in the great Franciscan church of Santa
Croce, seen so much ravishing gloriousity that a wasting
tuberculosis of the spirit has infected me?

After all, we are only three blocks from that very church,
final resting place of Galileo, Michelangelo, and the frescoes
of the life of St. Francis by Giotto, stellar pupil of Cenno
dei Pepi, better known as Cimabue.

I myself have swooned in Santa Maria del Carmine before the
fresco of the expulsion of Adam and Eve by Tommaso
Guido, called Masaccio, which means Dirty Tom, though
I don't know if this refers to a lack of hygiene or morals.

Fifteenth-century Florence was filled with these
double-monikered artists: Sandro Filipepi, called Botticelli;

Jacopo Carrucci, called Pontormo; and my favorite, Giovanni Antonio dei Bazzi, called Sodoma, for his predilection for young boys.

It's something you get used to, the young boys and everything having two names, for the English discovered Italy at the pinnacle of their empire.

Those crazy Inglese: why did they anglicize the perfectly pronounceable names of Italian cities?

Milano to Milan or Roma to Rome is understandable; when you have an empire to maintain, one syllable may be more efficient than two.

But Leghorn, I ask you? Why, when Livorno trips off the tongue like a mountain stream rippling over rocks?

And Firenze—a fierce word for this walled and contentious city—why change it to Florence?

And while we are in the interrogatory mood, I am reminded of another Anglo-Italian conundrum, posited by a fanciulla Veronese: “What’s in a name?”

Well she should ask, for in her country we find not only the irlandese, cinese, and inglese, but the indigenous milanese and the livornese and the fiorentini.

It becomes infinitely more complicated when in Perugia we meet a perugino, not simply the teacher of Raphael but a whole town filled with perugini, and in Arezzo the aretini, and in Montepulciano the poliziani.

But when we make our pilgrimage to Sansepolcro to see Piero della Francesca’s divine Resurrection, we meet not the sansepolcrese but the biturgensi and in Gubbio the eugubini, in Norcia the nursini.

And in Todi we find a city inhabited entirely by tudertini, a word which brings to mind tubers or truffles, tartufo in Italian, which sounds like Tartuffe, character in a play by Molière, favorite of the Sun King, born Jean-Baptiste Poquelin.